

Sunday 23rd September 2018
Trinity 17 (B)

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Wisdom 1.16-2.1,12-22

NT: James 3.13-4.3,7-8a

G: Mark 9.30-37

'But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him'.

"If a little learning is a dangerous thing- think how much damage a lot of it can do!" These are the words of the Dean of College in Tom Sharpe's marvellous (and frighteningly accurate) satire of university life, Porterhouse Blue. It is a maxim, I have to confess, that I stuck to doggedly to justify giving my academic work all of the two hours or so per week I felt it deserved as an undergraduate. However, society at large is clearly not of the view that ignorance is bliss. Or rather, if the opinions shared on Twitter or Facebook are anything to go by, it holds that a little knowledge is no barrier to making big assertions. Our obsession with being seen to know things is a trait as old as humanity itself, and it shows no sign of going away. We're not very good at keeping our knowledge to ourselves.

Knowledge and learning are at the centre of all three of our Bible lessons this week. The Book of Wisdom (aptly named) tells us of how we, humans, so often think we know the purposes of God and yet invariably get things wrong. The disciples, reliably muddle headed as always, grapple similarly with knowledge in our Gospel. First, they do not understand Jesus's teaching about his own death and then, foolishly, they think that by keeping silent they might conceal their embarrassing conversation about who is the greatest. As someone who spent prolonged periods of his childhood looking down at his shuffling feet as the question was asked- 'who broke this' or 'who threw that', I can confirm that it is one of the oldest tricks in the book and that it doesn't work- our secrets, whether it's a conversation we shouldn't have had or a thing we shouldn't have done, rarely stay secret for long. This is

partly because we're not very good at keeping bits of knowledge, secret or otherwise, to ourselves.

Indeed this is nothing new- the Ancient world was as obsessed by secret knowledge as we are. The Gnostic sect became convinced that salvation itself was dependent on a secret knowledge- often attained by a rigorous and self denying lifestyle. They were sort of like the love children of Richard Dawkins and Dr Gillian McKeith- health fanatics adamant that their logic and insight alone had sussed the secrets of the universe. It will come as no surprise to learn that Gnostics and the Early Christian Church did not get on. The conceptualisation of knowledge and learning that we have in our lessons today points to a very different understanding of the roles of human and cosmological wisdom.

Human learning- the presumed personality of God attributed by the ungodly in our Wisdom reading or the earnest debates of the disciples in our Gospels- is not the root of revelation, rather it leads inexorably to the conclusion that 'short and sorrowful is our life'. Firstly, as Wisdom makes clear, it will always, for all its loftiness, fall short of the actual glory of God and secondly, as the reading from James makes clear- the true wisdom from above, the wisdom of God, looks like something very different to the wisdom valued on earth.

The wisdom from above is pure and peaceable. The wisdom from above, ironically, is attained through an acknowledgement of our own limitations, our own shortcomings, our own dependence. The perfect wisdom, present before Creation itself, comes down from Heaven to dwell in a manger, to be despised and rejected, and to die upon a cross. It was this that the disciples failed to understand, and so were afraid to ask about, not least as it goes against all they (and we) assume we know about what is wise. A little learning is a dangerous thing indeed.

The wisdom from above eschews attempts at worldly justifications and debates about who is greatest and why, placing instead a little child in front of those who would so argue. By acknowledging that this wisdom is beyond us we, free ourselves to enjoy those 'good fruits' James speaks of, to realise what is really important- those 'wages of holiness' we hear of in Wisdom, that is to say a rejoicing in the abundant love of God. Paradoxically, we obtain Wisdom when we acknowledge that it is unobtainable by our efforts, but rather is a gift, like grace, borne of the overflowing love of God.

As we come to baptise Felix in a matter of moments, we will not be initiating him into some sort of cult of secret knowledge- but rather we mark him as adopted by the God who has known him and loved him from his mother's womb. We are not passing on some sort of arcane learning either, but rather welcoming him in the name of that same one who knew him and loved him from the very first.

“Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, “Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.””

Therein lies the glorious paradox of Christian knowledge. By welcoming a baby who may not even know where he is, we welcome the one who knows us better than we know ourselves. By welcoming a little child who cannot even speak for himself- we welcome the one by whose Word we and all that is came into being. Let us welcome Felix into Christ's Church, and let each of us prepare to welcome Christ, the pre-existent Wisdom himself, to our hearts anew. And let us welcome them, not puffed up by human learning, but revelling in the fullness of love. For it is thus that we might hope to become truly wise. Because if a little loving is a glorious thing, think how much good a lot of it might do.

Fr Fergus Butler-Gallie